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ABSTRACT

It has been theorized that the need for interpersonal contact is continuous throughout life and is necessary for one's well-being. The concept of self-disclosure, the process of making the self known to other persons, has been associated with varying levels of well-being. The content and comprehensiveness of self-disclosure by the elderly to an adult child vis-a-vis self-disclosure to a friend was examined and the relationship between self-disclosure and well-being in the elderly was analyzed. A volunteer sample of 107 elderly persons from six New York City senior citizen centers completed Lohman's Life Satisfactiion Scale and a modified version of Moriwaki's Self Disclosure Questionnaire. Results showed that differences in content areas disclosed to an adult child and those disclosed to a friend were significant. There was also a significant relationship between the content revealed to an adult child and well-being. Disclosure may have been listed secondary to other basic material needs since the group studied had a lower than average socioeconomic status. But the finding that different aspects of the self were disclosed in greater amounts to different individuals suggests that the elderly have a need for continued interaction with different network systems. (ABB)

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-DISCLOSURE AND WELL-BEING AMONG THE ELDERLY

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Abstract

The concept of self-disclosure was used to explore the interaction of 107 elderly persons. The research was based on the theory that the need for interpersonal contact is continuous throughout life and necessary for one's well-being. Lohmann's Life Satisfaction Scale (r = .86) and Moriwaki's Self Disclosure Questionnaire were administered. Specific areas examined were the content and comprehensiveness of self-disclosure by elderly to an adult child vis-a-vis a friend. The relationship between self-disclosure and well-being in the elderly were analyzed. Differences in content areas disclosed to an adult-child and to a friend were significant. There was also a significant relationship between the content revealed to an adult child and well-being. The multiple aspects of self-disclosure demand the need for the availability of social interaction.

Self-Disclosure Patterns Among the Elderly

The percentage of elderly persons in our society has been increasing. In 1980, for the first time, the total number of elderly persons surpassed the total number of children and youths in the country (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1980). It is expected that elderly persons will number 32 million in the year 2000 and nearly 56 million by 2035 (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1978).

Factors influencing the well-being of this segment of the population warrant studying. One aspect of well-being is the ability to communicate with others. Butler (1963, 1980) notes the importance of reminiscence in the presence of another person. When given the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings, elderly persons reflect upon their lives with the intent of resolving, reorganizing, and reintegrating their life situations (Butler, 1980).

Sullivan (1953) stated that people grow and remain healthy only in relationship with other people. Studies with infants by Spitz (1946) and Provence and Lipton (1962) portray the physical and psychological influences of decreased human interactions. Their findings indicated that behaviors most likely learned as a result of interaction were absent. An example of this was the low developmental level seen in these children.

The effects of altered and/or decreased interpersonal relationships in the elderly are present but are less obvious. The concept of self-disclosure, the process of making the self known to other persons, has been associated with varying levels of well-being. Jourard (1971a) asserted that self-disclosure is a symptom of personality health and

a means of achieving a healthy personality. A person who displays many of the characteristics of a healthy personality will also display the ability to make the self fully known to at least one other significant human being. Luft (1969) also considered openness to self and to others as an essential quality of living, a genuine need met only in interpersonal relationships.

Studies have examined differences in self-disclosure of young adults at different levels of wellness (Chelune, Sultan, & Williams, 1980; Mayo, 1968; Pederson & Higbee, 1969). These results support the hypothesis that low self-disclosure is associated with loneliness, neurotic symptoms, and emotional instability.

Only one study was noted in the literature (Moriwaki, 1971) that examined self-disclosure in a sample of elderly persons. All 71 respondents reported having at least one significant other and there was no difference in the number of significant others between persons less than 70 years of age and those older than 70 years. It appears that interpersonal relationship remains important for the young-old as well as the old-old. In a study by Lowenthal and Haven (1968) the presence of a confidant was important for well-being among elderly persons. They suggested that the capacity to establish at least one intimate relationship is an important variable for well-being. This relationship has been described as "close, with open communication that allows for honest and full disclosures of self" (Lowenthal & Haven, 1968).

There have also been studies that compare kin and nonkin relationships and their impact on well-being. A review of the literature revealed

that friendship relationships appear to be directly associated with well-being, while interaction with adult children seems not to enhance well-being (Blau, 1973; Lee, 1979; Lemon, Bergtson & Peterson, 1972; Pihlblad & Adams, 1972). The latter relationship is still maintained despite its reported lack of influence on well-being (Brown, 1960). One possible explanation is that different relationships meet different needs.

Litwak and Szelenyi (1969) suggested a differential function of social relationships. They characterize family relationships by permanent long-term commitments and friendship relationships by positive affect in tasks dealing with explicit "reference orientations." Similarly, Weiss (1974) proposed that a sense of reliable alliance is provided primarily by kin. In this relationship one can expect continuing assistance whether there is mutual affection or not or whether one has reciprocated for past help or not. Family relationships also provide opportunity for nurturance in which the adult takes responsibility for the well-being of a child. Weiss (1974) stated that responsibility for the well-being for children provides meaning to life and sustains commitment to goals. Conversely, friendship relations provide opportunity for social integration in which common concerns and experiences are pooled and shared. It is in friendship relations that the need for attachment is satisfied and in the absence of attachment relationships individuals feel lonely.

The theoretical framework for this study was Jourard's (1971b) concept of self-disclosure. The purpose was to analyze aspects of self-

disclosure to an adult child and to a friend and the relationships of these disclosures of self on well-being. The research question was: What is the relationship between content and completeness of self-disclosure to an adult child, a friend, and well-being in the elderly? Specific areas included were: (a) Are there differences in content of self-disclosure to an adult child and to a friend in the elderly? (b) What is the relationship between content of self-disclosure to an adult child, a friend, and well-being in the elderly? (c) What is the relationship between completeness of self-disclosure to an adult child-friend and well-being in the elderly?

Method

Sample

A volunteer convenient sample of 107 elderly persons participated in the study. All were attending one of the six New York City senior citizen centers. One hundred ninety-eight persons volunteered to participate in the study. The sample was limited to 107 participants based on the following criteria: (a) retirement, (b) indication of a friendship, (c) acknowledgment of the existence of an adult child, (d) ability to read and write English, and (e) not married at the present time.

Participants ranged in age from 65 to 92 years, with a mean age of 76 years. The majority of participants had been born in the United States. The general opinion of their health status was one of being fair. Almost all (94%) reported their annual income as $6000 or less. Most lived alone. The majority of the participants were female. Most

participants had not completed high school. The mean number of children was 2.2 and the most number of children reported was 9. As for friends, the mean number was 5.03 with a range of 1 to 9. Most of these friends lived nearby and the majority made contact more than once a week.

Instruments

Two instruments were used in the study: Lohmann's Life Satisfaction Scale and Moriwaki's Self Disclosure Scale.

Life Satisfaction Scale. This scale measures the concept of well-being. The content of this scale included items from a number of other measures, i.e., the Cavan Scale, Life Satisfaction Index A, Life Satisfaction Index B, Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale, Dean Scale, and Kutner Morale Scale (Lohmann, 1977).

The Life Satisfaction Scale consists of 32 items with a three-choice response format: "agree," "disagree," or "?." Examples of items are "My life is still busy and useful"; "My life could be happier than it is now." Lohmann reported a correlation coefficient of .89 for the scale. In this study a correlation coefficient of .86 was obtained.

Self Disclosure Questionnaire. Moriwaki's (1971) Self Disclosure Questionnaire represents an initial attempt at developing an appropriate self-disclosure questionnaire for the elderly. This questionnaire consists of 50 items covering 7 areas considered important to the elderly; namely, Social Relations (7 items); Personality (11 items); Achievement Roles (10 items); Attitudes and Opinions (8 items); Body (5 items); Financial and Living Conditions (5 items); and Tastes and Interests (4 items).

For the purposes of this study, Moriwaki's Self Disclosure Questionnaire was modified by this investigator so that each content area contained eight items. Some content areas that Moriwaki included had items deleted. New items were included in the following areas: Financial and Living Conditions (3 items), Tastes and Interests (4 items), and Body (5 items). The latter content area was referred to as Body and Health. The Self Disclosure Questionnaire so altered consists of 56 items covering the seven content areas identified by Moriwaki (1971).

Content validity on new items was established by a review of items by three experts in the field of gerontology. A pilot study was conducted on the Modified Self Disclosure Questionnaire with a sample of 20 elderly persons to establish reliability. Results were reported separately for responses regarding an adult child and responses regarding a friend. Reliabilities for the 14 subscales ranged from .61 to .92, all within acceptable range for research purposes. The study reliabilities of the study sample were .65 to .89. There were similarities between this sample for pilot study and the study sample.

Procedure

Permission to approach persons who were members of seven senior citizen centers within New York City was sought from administrators of these agencies. Seven agency administrators were contacted; six agreed to let the researcher seek participants among the members of the center. The investigator explained the study as an attempt to assess the social reltionship among elderly people and requested their participation. All volunteers completed the questionnaires in a designated room away from the central activity area within the premises.

Results

Hypothesis 1

There are differences in the content of self-disclosure to an adult child and a friend, specifically: (a) an adult child receives more disclosure than friend in areas of Body and Health, Financial and Living Conditions; (b) a friend receives more disclosure than adult child in areas of Achievement Roles, Personality, Social Relations, Attitudes and Opinions; (c) there is a difference in disclosure on Tastes and Interests to adult child and friend.

This hypothesis was derived from the proposition advanced by Weiss (1974) that different types of relationships satisfy different needs. In the parent-child relationship the need for nurturance, relatedness, and continuity are met, while friendship interactions satisfy the need for social integration and a sense of worth.

The amount of self-disclosure to an adult child was compared to the amount of self-disclosure to a friend for each of the seven content areas. Correlated *t* tests were performed for each of the seven scales. One-tailed tests were performed to reflect the directional nature of the first six comparisons. For Tastes and Interests, a two-tailed correlated *t* test was performed. The comparison of means and tests of significance are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Support of differences in content of self-disclosure to an adult child and friend is similar to previous findings (Kramer, 1978; Ricker-Ovsianskina, 1956) that friends were disclosed to in the personal regions of self with samples of young adults. There was no statistically significant difference between disclosure to an adult child and to a friend in the area of Tastes and Interests.

Hypothesis 2

Self-disclosure to a friend in the content areas of Achievement Roles, Personality, Social Relations, Attitudes and Opinions will be more predictive of well-being than self-disclosure to adult child in content areas of Body and Health, Financial and Living Conditions.

A multiple regression analysis was used to determine the contribution of the four measures of self-disclosure on well-being but no statistically significant relation was found.

Analysis of Hypothesis 2 was repeated using self-disclosure to an adult child. The rationale for this was related to the finding that the choice of a confidant varied by social class, with elderly persons of lower status being less likely to have a friend as confidant than those of higher status (Lowenthal & Haven, 1968). In this study, the result indicated that closeness to the adult child to whom the elderly person disclosed was related to well-being ($r = .16$, $p < .05$). Further, a multiple regression of well-being on four areas (Achievement Roles, Personality, Social Relations, Attitudes and Opinions) of self-disclosure to an adult child was found to be statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. This significant but low correlation ($R^2 = .083$; $F = 4,129$

= 2.92, $p < .05$) may indicate that closer (intimate) relationship with an adult child leads to more disclosure in those areas which were ordinarily disclosed to friends. See Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

The assumption that self-disclosure to a child in the areas of Body and Health, Financial and Living Conditions is not related to well-being was supported. The multiple regression analysis was not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level ($F(2, 104) = 1.31$).

Hypothesis 3

Elderly persons who disclose more completely to an adult child and friend will have a greater sense of well-being than those who disclose less completely.

This hypothesis was based on the proposition (Weiss, 1976) that different relationships satisfy different needs. It was hypothesized that persons who self-disclose within different relationships will indicate a higher level of well-being than those who disclose less.

Scores on all 14 subscales were dichotomized at the median. Participants who scored above the median on a given scale were assigned a code of 1; those scoring below the median were assigned a code of 0. Codes were then summed across the seven subscales for an adult child and friend yielding two new scores, each with a range of 0 to 7.

A regression of well-being on the two independent variables, completeness of self-disclosure to an adult child and friend, did not yield a statistically significant relationship.

Discussion

The findings of this study support Weiss' (1976) notion that individuals maintain different relationships in order to meet different needs. Adult children are the primary recipients of disclosures relating to Body and Health, Financial and Living Conditions, and friends are the primary recipients of disclosures in the area of Achievement Roles, Personality, Social Relations, and Attitudes and Opinions. Cantor (1979) suggested that family members provide long-range assistance while the primary function of a friend was in the socialization and affective domains. The result of this study does support previous findings that friends receive more disclosure in the more sensitive areas of self.

The moderately high disclosure to both an adult child and friends in the content area of Tastes and Interest was probably related to the superficial nature of the items. The items in the content area may have been perceived as nonthreatening and were therefore as readily disclosed to an adult child as to a friend.

Lack of support for Hypothesis 2 was surprising in view of previous research results which indicated a positive relationship between friendship interactions and well-being (Arling, 1976; Lemon et al., 1972; Pihlblad & Adams, 1972). This difference between previous research findings and the present study may be related to the fact that this study used a relatively new scale to measure well-being (Lohmann's, 1977). Comparisons and interpretations of results across different scales become difficult or at least speculative. In the development of the Life Satisfaction Scale used in this study Lohmann (1977) reported a much

higher mean score for the "community" residents than that which was obtained in this study ($\underline{M}$ = 25.09 and $\underline{M}$ = 19.29, respectively). In general, elderly persons who participated in this study indicated a lower level of well-being than those in Lohmann's study.

The majority of respondents in this study were of lower socioeconomic status. About 94% had less than $6,000 per year, compared to a national median income of $6,479 for retired elderly persons (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983). Previous studies have used samples representing higher than average income levels (Lemon et al., 1972; Lowenthal & Haven, 1968). Differences in results may have been influenced by differences in the economic status, since income is an important determinant of well-being among elderly persons (Edward & Klemmack, 1973). The importance has been presented by Maslow's (1970) theory who suggested that safety and security needs must be met before a person can pursue the higher needs of self-esteem. For this sample of elderly persons with lower economic status the desire to satisfy the safety and security needs may have been paramount.

In view of the finding that content of self-disclosure to a friend was not related to well-being, the question arises: In what way does the presence of friends influence well-being? Cantor (1979) noted that persons who lived alone had more friends than those who lived with another person and that friends were used for socialization and to allay the effects of loneliness. As such, it is the number of friends rather than the disclosures to a friend that is important for these elderly persons.

Lack of support for Hypothesis 3 was surprising in view of Weiss' (1976) delineation of the different functions of social interaction. It was expected that elderly persons who had and maintained different network systems (identified as adult child and friend in this study) would show higher levels of well-being. However, some of the findings of this study are contrary to the existing literature.

Most of the elderly persons in this study had more than one adult child and many friends. It is possible that different aspects of self were disclosed to each adult child. Similarly, the elderly person with a large number of friends may not disclose in exactly the same amount or in the same content to all friends. It is possible that in responding to the items on the Self Disclosure Questionnaire with one adult child or friend in mind, the research participant may not have indicated the real extent of disclosures.

Second, it is not clear from the results obtained whether disclosures to the friend were primarily positive or negative in nature. The contents of self-disclosure may have varied according to each participant's view of his/her life experiences. For instance, elderly persons who perceived their life experience as positive may disclose positively while those who perceived their experiences as negative would disclose on these negative aspects. And since disclosures on the negative aspects of self were negatively related to well-being (Moriwaki, 1971), it is possible that disclosure to the friend may not have been primarily positive as was anticipated. That is, completeness of self-disclosure may be related to well-being only if there is greater disclosure on positive aspects rather than on the negative aspects of self.

Differences in population characteristics between Weiss' (1976) study and the present study may have contributed to differences in results. The population in Weiss' study was comprised of both single parents and married couples who had recently relocated to a new community while this study sampled elderly persons who were retired, primarily widowed, and with limited financial resources. It is possible that for Weiss' sample their basic needs were being satisfied; as such the desire to satisfy other needs in social relationships emerged. But for the elderly persons in this study, social relationships may be a vehicle to the satisfaction of material needs. As such, completeness of self-disclosure to an adult child and a friend were of secondary importance and accounted for only 2% of the variance in well-being.

The results of this investigation have special implications for nurses. Nurses may view self-disclosure in the elderly as an essential therapeutic measure. However, for people who do not have their basic needs met due to factors as low socioeconomic status disclosure becomes secondary to other more basic needs. Nurses must be cognizant of this.

The finding that different aspects of self were disclosed in greater amounts to different individuals indicates the need for continued interaction with different network systems. Nurses should foster continued association with children and their friends of the elderly.

This study should be replicated with a sample which includes elderly persons of middle and high socioeconomic status and those who are employed to increase heterogeneity and reflect the diverse nature of the elderly population.

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Table 1

Comparison of Self-Disclosure to an Adult Child and Self-Disclosure to a Friend (N = 107)

	Adult child		Friend		
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	t (106)
Attitudes and Opinions	4.00	2.66	5.72	3.10	- 6.59*
Achievement Roles	4.62	2.85	6.73	3.23	- 7.49*
Financial and Living Conditions	8.69	3.68	4.29	2.23	11.19*
Personality	4.69	3.03	6.56	3.56	- 5.49*
Body and Health	8.28	3.69	4.36	2.83	10.20*
Social Relations	5.56	3.18	7.09	3.09	- 5.37*
Tastes and Interests	8.03	4.12	8.25	3.58	- .62

*p < .001.

Table 2

Regression of Well-Being on Self-Disclosure to an Adult Child

(N = 134)

Self-disclosure variable	*r*	*B*	*F*(1, 129)
Attitudes and Opinions	.23	.37	1.39
Achievement Roles	.21	.24	.56
Personality	.12	-.38	1.78
Social Relations	.25	.41	2.26

Note. $R^2 = .083$; $F(4, 129) = 2.92$, $p < .05$.